

Michigan Freedom Trail
Commission 2005/06

Annual Report

Michigan



FREEDOM
Trail

Michigan Freedom Trail Commission 2005

Executive Summary

Michigan's Story

Slavery was legal in the territory that would become Michigan until the adoption of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787. Michigan prohibited slavery when it adopted its first state constitution in 1835. The people who resisted slavery by escaping to Michigan, or by helping those who escaped, made this state a place where the conflict over whether any person could own another shaped communities and lives. Michigan's Underground Railroad stories document the lives of African Americans who escaped enslavement in rural and urban communities and the strategies that anti-slavery activists used to challenge and dismantle slavery. These methods of resisting slavery included public demonstration, challenging and changing the law, forming anti-slavery organizations or religious congregations, holding public meetings, and speaking and writing against slavery. Black and white women and men in Michigan, who often knew each other through religious or political affiliations, provided African Americans who escaped slavery with safe places to hide, food and sometimes clothing.

In 1861 the Civil War drew on long-standing conflicts between those who claimed to own African Americans as slaves and those who insisted that a human could not and would not be owned. African Americans who had escaped from slavery, and African and European Americans who had assisted them, used the war as an opportunity to even more directly challenge the system of enslavement. If they were of age to fight, many African American men in Michigan joined the 102nd regiment, while others served as organizers and promoters of the regiment. Many African American men who had escaped to Canada returned to the United States to engage in the battle against slavery, and after the war women and men returned to the U.S. and became part of communities from Detroit to Adrian to Vandalia to Mecosta County.

These stories and the many yet to be documented are the Michigan Freedom Trail.

The Michigan Freedom Trail Commission

The Michigan Freedom Trail Commission is part of the Michigan Historical Center, an agency of the Department of History, Arts and Libraries (HAL). To learn more about the commission and its work, visit www.michigan.gov/freedomtrail.



Dedicated to strengthening the economy and enriching the quality of life by providing access to information, preserving and promoting Michigan's heritage and fostering cultural creativity, the department also includes the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs, the Michigan Film Office and the Library of Michigan.



In 1998 Public Act 409 established the Michigan Freedom Trail Commission and directed it to preserve, protect and promote the legacy of the Freedom Trail in Michigan. The commission was appointed in 2002 and held its first meeting in May. On February 19, 2003, the commission – led by chairperson Mary Edmond and vice-chair De Witt S. Dykes, Jr. – adopted its first strategic plan. Program areas have been established to reach the goals set forth in the plan.



Programs

SUPPORTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE: To nurture and build the capacity of the organizations, institutions and individuals that are the stewards of the Underground Railroad story—the “modern day” conductors.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION: To bring together interested people in a specific community, give them the broader context of the Underground Railroad story and help them start or further their work on their community's particular stories.

NATIONAL COORDINATION: To maintain links with work going on around the country, share that information throughout the state and ensure that Michigan's story is known outside our state.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: To help existing organizations and community efforts identify research and researchers, pull together grants and shape stronger programs.

DOCUMENTATION AND RESEARCH: To increase accurate, authentic knowledge and interpretation of the Underground Railroad in Michigan.

IDENTIFICATION AND PRESERVATION: To ensure that Michigan Underground Railroad sites persist because they are identified, preserved and maintained.

EDUCATION: To make the Underground Railroad recognized as a subject of study in its own right—not just an appendage of the Civil War.

CULTURAL AND HERITAGE TOURISM AND PUBLIC AWARENESS: To give authentic Underground Railroad history a level of public and heritage tourism recognition equal to that of the Great Lakes, the automobile and lighthouses.



The Michigan Freedom Trail Today

Knowledge and celebration of the Michigan Freedom Trail have grown appreciably since the adoption of the commission's strategic plan. The commission initiated some of this growth through specific programs:

THE MICHIGAN UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AND RESISTANCE TO SLAVERY BIBLIOGRAPHY gives researchers both primary and secondary source references.

Researchers have compiled a bibliography more than 25 pages listing primary and secondary sources that help tell local, state, national and international stories of the UGRR and resistance to slavery.



THE RAMPTOWN/YOUNG'S PRAIRIE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT, conducted by Western Michigan University, found evidence of a community of formerly enslaved people whose first experience of freedom was as farmhands for Quakers in Cass County.



WMU archaeologists reported that they found fragments of dishware, bottles, glass, a smoking pipe, freshwater clam shells, nails and a button in a 760-acre survey of eight sites believed to be associated with the men and women who resisted slavery.



The Ramptown/Young's Prairie Artifacts

Freedom Trail Today

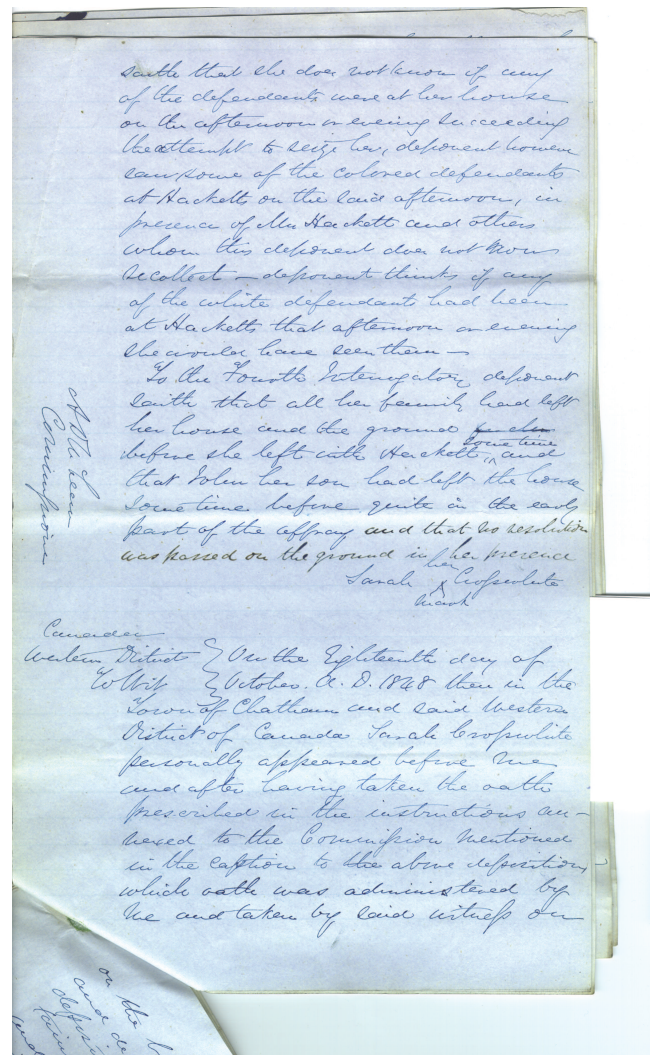
RESEARCH, coordinated with staff, other researchers and commissioners, has demonstrated that the Underground Railroad is a documentable, complex story rather than one shrouded in mystery and tales of hidden places.

Through a research collaboration, scholars gathered a collection of 1848 U.S. Circuit Court files from the National Archives.

...deponent believes the door of her and her husbands house was violently broken open by one Frances Troutman and David Giltner who then came in the house with Mr. Dixon the Deputy Sheriff and two other men who endeavored to take this deponent her husband and family to trial as they said; deponent said she would not go to trial with them or allow her children to go, for she would die first they offered to get a wagon to take her with her family to trial but deponent persisted in not going if they did bring a wagon after a good deal of conversation Giltner sat down and cried and said if deponent would give up the children, they would not take deponent and her husband away but leave them alone deponent refust [sic] however to give up the children, saying to Giltner that they meaning her former owner had the best part of her life at their service and she intended keeping her children to take care of her in her old days....

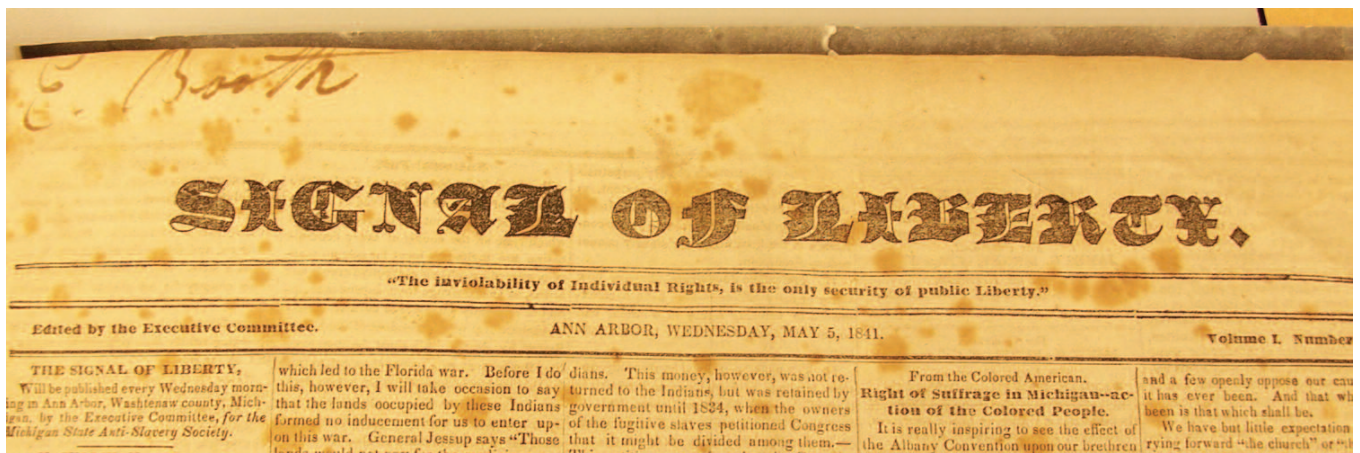
Transcription of Sarah Crosswhite
Deposition Law Case File 1900,
Francis Giltner vs Charles Gorham et al
October 18, 1848 Chatham, Ontario

Sarah Crosswhite escaped from the farm of Francis Giltner in Carrol County, Kentucky, with her husband, and their four children in August 1843. The family lived in Marshall, Michigan, until 1847, when Giltner's representatives came to Marshall to recapture the Crosswhite family. African Americans and European Americans in the community resisted the recapture of the Crosswhites through legal and physical means. The Crosswhites escaped and settled in Buxton, Ontario. They returned to Marshall after the Civil War.



THE MICHIGAN FREEDOM TRAIL REGISTER was established to complement the National Network to Freedom listing of sites. It will support planned cultural tourism initiatives.

Cass, Kalamazoo, Calhoun, Jackson, Washtenaw, Lenawee, Wayne and Genesee counties all have significant stories that are easily documented to include on the Michigan Freedom trial register. Oakland, Berrien, St. Clair, Ottawa and Monroe counties have mounting evidence for inclusion on the register.



Today Freedom Trail Today



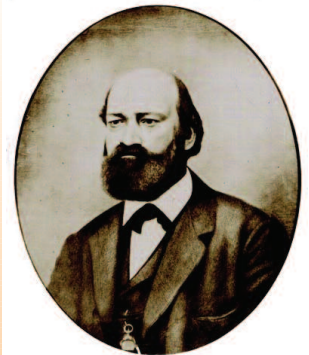
The Web and hard-copy curriculum for 3rd, 4th and 8th graders uses many primary documents to help tell the Michigan story. This rare photo shows a young George De Baptiste somewhere between his native home in Virginia and his work on the Underground Railroad in Detroit.

BUILDING COLLECTIVE NARRATIVES: TEACHING MICHIGAN'S STORIES, funded by the Michigan Humanities Council, is producing materials aligned with the Michigan Curriculum Framework that open windows on our nation's history through the words and actions of people in their own back yards.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS begin with a presentation on the Underground Railroad in Michigan and move to organizing and assisting local enthusiasts as they document and celebrate their own particular stories through oral history interviews,

archival research, street theater, small exhibits and other public events. They have begun in Monroe, Lowell, Ann Arbor, Detroit, Kalamazoo, Schoolcraft, Marshall and Three Rivers.

The commission worked with the Marshall DAR, housed in the James Wright Gordon Governor's Mansion, to develop and host the first walking tour dedicated to new perspectives on the Sarah and Adam Crosswhite story, drawn from depositions collected from the National Archives in Chicago.



George DeBaptiste

MARKERS AND EXHIBITS in Cass and Genesee County increase visibility of key places in the state where the history of the UGRR and resistance to slavery in Michigan took place. The Ruth S. Mott Foundation supported the works in Flint.

The commission worked with local citizens in Cass County and the State Bar of Michigan to erect and dedicate the Bar's 30th legal milestone, "Freedom Road," commemorating the Kentucky Raid of 1847.

Today

Freedom Trail Today

In April 1847, 13 women and men escaped the enslavement of a group of European American planters in Kinton County, Kentucky and settled at Young's Prairie in Calvin Township in Cass County. They helped farm the land of European American Quakers until August, when 22 Kentuckians sought to recapture the escapees.

The community resisted the recapture, and the Kentuckians were indicted and jailed for kidnapping and assault and battery. The African Americans, too, were held. The court ruled against the Kentuckians on a technicality and ordered the release of the fugitives.

The Kentuckians sued seven Quakers in the U.S. Circuit Court in Detroit for the "value" of those who escaped. The trial ended in a hung jury, but facing retrial, two of the defendants paid damages and court costs in the final settlement.

FORUMS AND SYMPOSIUMS bring together those interested in the research, interpretation and dissemination of the history of resistance to slavery and the Underground Railroad in Michigan and the Midwestern region.

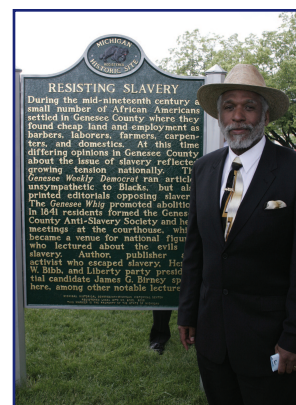
More than 100 people from the U.S. and Canada attended the **Slavery, Freedom and Resistance Symposium** held in Detroit at First Congregational Church in 2005.



THE MICHIGAN HISTORICAL MUSEUM has added Freedom Trail segments, developed by the Freedom Trail coordinator, to the BIG History Lesson, Mini-Excursions and after school programs.

Individual organizations and communities throughout the state have made major contributions to discovering, telling and protecting Michigan's Freedom Trail heritage. Commission members and staff have collaborated with local groups in the following projects:

- The Flint Underground Railroad Heritage Program supported by the Ruth Mott Foundation.
- The Cass County Free Soil Tour
- First Congregational Church Living Museum
- The Wild Swan Theater
- Michigan Bar Association Legal Milestone Marker
- Port Huron Museum
- University of Michigan
- Kalamazoo Valley Museum teacher seminars
- Indigo Productions "Each of These Legs is a Road" multi media project
- Grand Valley State University
- Western Michigan University
- Marshall DAR Crosswhite Case Street Theater



Tomorrow

The Michigan Freedom Trail Tomorrow

The commission has reviewed its strategic plan and concluded that its emphasis over the next two years needs to be on completing documentation of sites for the Michigan Freedom Trail Register and helping those sites expand their ability to draw cultural/heritage tourists to Michigan to experience our extraordinary stories of resistance and freedom.

The Michigan Freedom Trail Commission has also begun a new initiative to coordinate monthly research meetings at the Bentley Library at the University of Michigan. Individuals and groups come together from across the state to explore possible connections between the communities and the UGRR and resistance to slavery.



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